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The Story of Mary Reed



Missionary to the Lepers

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*Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church
36 Bromfield Street, Boston, Mass.*



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MISSIONARY TO THE LEPERS

THE STORY of Mary Reed, with its high appeal to the heroic that is latent in all noble souls, has been told on more than one occasion, and been the means of enlisting devoted service and generous giving to the work of the Kingdom. Painful as the publicity has been to the sensitive soul of this brave missionary, she has, nevertheless, had the consolation of knowing that her bravery and sweetness of spirit, under conditions such as no one not similarly afflicted could appreciate, have been the source of untold inspiration to hundreds whom she will never see during her earthly life.

She was sent to India in 1884 by the Cincinnati Branch of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Her work was first in Cawnpore but as the climate proved unfavorable to her health she was transferred to Gonda. In 1890 she returned home for her first furlough, and the following year, while an inmate in Christ's Hospital, Cincinnati—where she had undergone a critical surgical operation—she was obliged to give

serious attention to a peculiar and troublesome sore that appeared on the end of her right forefinger.

Several physicians examined it, but, as they had never seen anything of the sort before, it was not regarded as dangerous. As it continued to be troublesome, however, amputation was finally suggested. One day while lying in bed, Miss Reed was listlessly tapping the counterpane with her finger, as a relief to the dull pain that she had felt for some time, and thinking of God's dealings with her in her past life, when suddenly, and so distinctly that she could not misunderstand it, the conviction came to her—almost as if a voice had spoken:

“The trouble with your finger is leprosy; you must return to India and go at once to the leper asylum at Pithoragarh, and devote the rest of your life to teaching the lepers.” A vision of the distant mountain asylum that has since been her home flashed before her, and although such a thought had never entered her mind previously, and she had no recollection of ever having been exposed to the disease, from that moment she never wavered as to the work that God was calling her to do.

When she gave the hospital surgeon her diagnosis, he would not believe her, and endeavored to persuade her that the case could not be so serious as she supposed. He promised to look it up carefully in his medical books, however, and

report to her the following day. A glance at his face when he next visited her, and his distress of mind, showed that he had been convinced against his will. Leprosy is not a disease with which American surgeons are likely to become familiar, however, and although two physicians of high standing corroborated Miss Reed's view, all felt that no chances should be taken and that more than "book knowledge" should be obtained. She was therefore quietly sent to New York, to a physician who had spent some time in the West Indies studying the disease, and who was regarded as an authority in the United States. He confirmed the decision already reached, but his sympathies were so keenly enlisted that he gave Miss Reed a letter of introduction to Sir Joseph Frayer, of London, the most eminent authority on Indian diseases in the world.

Miss Reed bravely made her plans for a speedy return to India, sustained by the power from on high that is always in reserve when hard experiences must be lived through. And surely it would be difficult to conceive of a more "fiery trial" than that of being smitten with the disease that is perhaps most dreaded of any in the world. Suffering like hers must largely be borne alone, yet there were those in the home circle who must share in it, and Miss Reed determined that she would spare them the painful knowledge until after her departure.

She therefore wrote home that she had decided to return to India immediately,

and during her farewell visit she told her mother casually that for a special reason she had formed the resolve never to kiss any one again, and that she hoped it would not seem strange if she should go away without a good-bye kiss. The mother asked no questions, supposing that there must be sufficient reason for this singular resolve, but it was hard to persuade her that her daughter should return so soon, while her health was still only partly restored. It was not until the arrival of the letter, sent after Miss Reed had reached India, that the mother learned the sad story and knew the quality of her daughter's courage.

When her preparations were completed, Miss Reed quietly left her home, as if she were merely going to call on a neighbor, having disclosed only to one sister, whom she pledged to secrecy, the reason for her hasty departure. Happily, it was not the last time that she was to see that home, but she had no such hope in her heart then, and her heroism has thrilled all who have heard her story. On shipboard her sweet, sad face and gentle manner attracted attention, and won her a friendship that was a great comfort during the first part of the hard journey; but, after all, it was her sense of sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings that sustained her and that has glorified her work through all the years that have followed.

The London specialist made a most careful examination, but his decision was

the same as that of the other physicians. He supplied her, however, with the latest remedies and a few monographs on the subject of leprosy that have since been of value to her. Hoping that he might be mistaken, he also gave her a letter of introduction to a noted physician in Bombay, who had seen leprosy all his life, and made her promise that she would be examined by him before going to the leper colony. This she did, but the Bombay physician was most emphatic in pronouncing her disease to be leprosy.

When the world heard the story the keenest interest was excited and tidings of Mary Reed were eagerly sought. Quietly and calmly she entered at once upon her work, and, as if to test her faith in the certainty of her call, the disease for a time made painful progress. She had no assurance that it would be stayed, although constant prayer in her behalf was offered by countless friends, made such by sympathy and belief in the power of "prayer in faith." For a long time the reports that came from Chandag Heights, where her little bungalow is located, dealt chiefly with the growing work and the patience and bravery of this suffering missionary. Friends visited her, but she ate at her own table and took every precaution to prevent infection. What her mental and spiritual suffering must have been no one was permitted to see.

Then came reports that the disease had been stayed; then, that improvement

was marked. Now, the testimony of missionary friends is that she moves freely among them and that "all feel that she is perfectly well." The sceptical say that a mistake must have been made in the original diagnosis, but with five physicians of high standing, each convinced against his will, and three of them specialists, a statement of this sort is hardly credible. Those who believe in divine power and the value of special intercession are convinced that Mary Reed has been healed because of the great volume of prayer that has ascended in her behalf.

In 1903 Miss Reed left her work for a furlough that lasted three years, part of the time being spent in the Holy Land. During this period she had the great happiness of visiting her home once more, remaining about a month. Her visit, however, was kept as quiet as possible.

She returned to her work in November, 1906, joyfully taking up again the ministry to which she has devoted her life. The leper asylum of which she is superintendent is controlled and supported by the Scotch Leper Mission, but at their request Miss Reed is a regularly appointed missionary of the society by which she was first sent out. Under her wise planning the mission plant, which occupies about one hundred acres of land, has been carefully and systematically developed, until now it comprises separate homes for men and women patients, quarters for treatment of the different stages of the disease, and a hospital,

dispensary and chapel. She has an average of eighty men and women under her care.

No one can estimate the value of her sympathetic ministry to the souls and bodies of the afflicted ones sent to her for help. Surely if the quality of service is measured by its difficulty and its cost in heroic sacrifice of self, the name of Mary Reed will have a high place on the roll of those who have "counted not their lives dear unto themselves."

